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ABSTRACT

Past research on interpersonal trust has been conducted almost exclusively on white samples, and the generalizability of these findings to blacks and other minority groups is unclear. To examine the relationship of trust to attitudes and behaviors in college students, 100 black and 131 white students completed a questionnaire packet, which included the Rotter Interpersonal Trust Scale and measures designed to assess family and background influences on the development of trust. Reactions to a vignette describing a possible breach of trust were also obtained. Subjects were divided into high and low trusters on the basis of Rotter Trust Scale scores. Significant differences between the racial groups indicated that black males and females evidenced lower trust, suggesting special factors at work affecting the extent, nature, and etiology of trust in blacks. Many of the variables that varied predictably with trust levels among whites did not do so among blacks. The results suggest caution in interpreting or extrapolating to black relationships findings that have been demonstrated only in whites. (JAC)

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Poster Summary

Interpersonal Trust in Black and White University Students**

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Interpersonal trust as defined by Rotter (1967; 1971) is the generalized expectancy that the word or promise of another individual or group can be relied upon. A review of the literature on trust reveals that past research has been conducted almost exclusively on White samples (e.g., Katz & Rotter, 1969; Wright & Kermani, 1977). While these studies have contributed information on factors which relate to trust levels, the development of trust and the relationship of interpersonal trust to trustworthy behavior, the generalizability of these findings to Blacks and other minority groups is unclear. Prejudice and discrimination experienced by these groups may have implications for the development of interpersonal trust and/or the relationship of trust level to behavior. The present study measured trust among Black and White University students and examined the relationship of trust scores to several attitudinal variables and self-reported behaviors.

** The authors would like to thank Marcia Sutherland for her help in collecting the data.

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METHOD

Subjects

A total of 100 Black (74 females, 26 males) and 131 White (31 females, 100 males) students from two local universities participated in this research. All were given an informed consent form prior to receiving the questionnaire which described the nature of the study and explained their rights. Anonymity and confidentiality were insured through the use of numerical codes to identify all data.

Procedures

The Black students were introduced to the research in small groups (10-15 persons). Subjects were greeted by the experimenter who described the study as involving a survey of attitudes and beliefs on various topics. Subjects were instructed not to converse during the experiment. The questionnaire packet contained the Rotter Interpersonal Trust Scale and several additional measures designed to assess:

- a) The extent to which subjects generally believed and relied upon the information provided by others, i.e., their general orientation toward others.
- b) What principle regarding trusting others was most often reflected in their parents' words and actions.
- c) How frequently subjects perceived one would be deceived by others in routine interactions.
- d) Their reactions to a vignette describing a situation in which there was a possible breach of trust.
- e) How frequently during childhood or adolescence they had engaged in behaviors such as cheating on a test, lying, letting another take the blame for their actions, shoplifting, and stealing.

Upon completing the questionnaire, students were thanked for their participation and any questions they had were addressed.

The White subjects received the questionnaire as part of a packet of measures delivered into their student mailboxes. The same greeting and instructions from the experimenter were included in an introductory letter. Because these students could receive the questionnaire only by mail, it was decided apriori that measure "e" would be deleted because of its personal and sensitive nature.

RESULTS

Black and White subjects were divided into high and low trusters on the basis of median splits on the Rotter Trust Scale scores for their group. Within the White sample, high trusters and low trusters did not differ in their general orientation toward others, the majority of both groups (94%, 85%, respectively) reporting that they usually take what others tell them at face value unless they know for sure it is inaccurate. However, high trusters more frequently than low trusters (89% vs. 65%) reported that their parent's words and actions embodied the principle that people are good and kind and that it is important to give the other person the benefit of the doubt unless you have clear evidence for not doing so. In contrast, low trusters were more than twice as likely as highs (35% vs. 11%) to indicate that their parents embodied the principle that one must be cautious in dealing with others so as not to be taken in by someone's scheme ($\chi^2 (1) = 9.75$ $p < .002$). Trust levels also differentiated responses to the vignette (see Appendix A) with high trusters endorsing the more trusting response (i.e., that the roommate was on the phone when your friend called) to a greater extent ($p < .03$) and being nearly three times less likely than low trusters to select the least trusting response when forced to make a choice (8% vs. 22%). High trusters and low trusters differed marginally ($p < .10$) in their responses to the question, if person "A" usually believes what other people

tell him/her, in how many out of 10 interactions will person "A" be deceived? 18.4% of low trusters answered more than 5 out of 10 versus 4.5% of the high trusters. There was no sex difference in trust score within the White sample and no differences between White males and females on any of the other variables.

Within the Black sample, considering first those variables also measured in the White sample, trust levels differentiated subjects only in general orientation toward others, with high trusters more than three times less likely than low trusters to report that they are usually skeptical of the truthfulness of what others tell them and do not believe it unless there is corroborating evidence (10% vs. 30%; $\chi^2(1) = 5.04, p < .02$). Similar to the White sample, there was no sex difference in trust score and no differences between women and men in general orientation toward others, or in their responses regarding their parents' attitudes toward trusting others, the frequency of deception occurring in routine interactions or in their reactions to the vignette.

Differences were revealed, however, on several variables that were measured only in the Black sample. Of the six untrustworthy behaviors assessed (i.e. cheating on a test, lying, letting someone else take the blame, shoplifting, and stealing money) high trusters differed from low's only in taking money, high trusters being more than five times less likely than low trusters to report engaging in that behavior more than a few times (4% vs. 21%, $\chi^2(2) = 7.70, p < .02$). Also sex differences occurred with Black women perceiving themselves to be more trusted by others than Black men ($p < .05$). Black males reported a higher frequency of lying in a serious matter ($p < .03$), and taking money ($p < .09$), but there were no sex differences for cheating or letting someone else get blamed. Also environment growing up (i.e., rural vs. urban) related to certain of these behaviors. Compared to students who grew up in an urban environment those from a rural background were more likely to report never having cheated on a test (8% vs. 32%, respectively; $\chi^2(2) = 13.28, p < .001$) or

shoplifted (47% vs. 71%, respectively; $\chi^2(2) = 5.71, p < .05$) and also were less likely to report letting someone else take the blame for their actions, although this difference was marginal. Environment growing up also differentiated expectations of how frequently one is deceived in routine interactions, with 36% of the students from a rural background answering 8 out of 10 or higher versus 18% for those who grew up in an urban environment. There was no difference between Black women and men in frequency of growing up in an urban versus a rural environment and there was no difference in trust score as a function of environment growing up.

Finally, comparing the White and Black samples there was a sizeable difference in the range of the scores (51 to 105 for White subjects, 36 to 90 for Black subjects) which was reflected in a significant difference in mean trust score ($X = 76.82$ s.d. = 9.52 White; $X = 62.65$ s.d. = 9.57 Black). There was little difference between the groups in their general orientation toward others, the majority of Blacks and Whites reporting that they generally take what others tell them at face value (80% vs. 89%). However, there were differences in responses to the vignette with Blacks endorsing the least trusting response three times more frequently than Whites (45% vs. 15%). With respect to the attitudes of their parent's toward trusting others, 69% of Blacks reported that their parents advocated being cautious with others so as not to be taken in, while 77% of Whites reported their parents endorsed giving the other person the benefit of the doubt. Finally for frequency of expected deception in routine interaction 25% of Blacks answered 8 or more times out of 10 compared to 3% for Whites.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored trust levels, trustworthy responses and related factors among Black and White students. Several interesting findings emerged. First, the significant difference between the race groups revealed that Black males and females evidenced lower trust. This suggests that there may be some special factors at work

affecting the extent, nature and/or etiology of trust in the Black group. Second, many of the variables that varied predictably with trust levels among White subjects did not do so among Blacks. This cautions against interpreting or extrapolating to Blacks relationships with interpersonal trust that have been demonstrated in White subjects only.

Although no intergroup sex differences were revealed, sex differences within the Black sample were observed for several untrustworthy behaviors. Because this measure was assessed only in Blacks, whether similar differences would be observed among whites is an empirical question, although an expectation of similar results would be consistent with research indicating that women (White and Black) tend to be somewhat more moralistic than men.

The fact that Black subjects who grew up in a rural versus an urban environment differed significantly on a number of variables is a novel finding and merits further study. That those from a rural background evidenced less trust than subjects reared in an urban environment in terms of their response to the vignette and their estimates of the frequency of being deceived in routine interactions and yet were less likely than "urbans" to report ever cheating on a test or shoplifting is a bit puzzling, but suggests that the degree of relationship between trust of others and trustworthy behavior may differ in different environments. As noted by Rotter (1980) trust is fundamental to the fabric of society and human relationships. The questions addressed and those raised by this study underscore the need for further attention to the issue of interpersonal trust.

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APPENDIX A

I. Vignette

Consider the following situation:

You have a roommate who you have lived with for the past three months since starting school. This roommate likes to nap each afternoon for three or four hours, and prefers to take the phone off the hook so as not to be disturbed by its ringing. Because you were upset that people were unable to reach you or leave messages, you discussed this with your roommate who agreed that on Mondays and Thursdays the phone would not be unhooked so that you could receive messages. Yesterday, on Thursday, you were expecting a very important message by phone from a friend. When you got home, you asked your roommate if your friend had called, and he said, "no"--you asked if the phone had been off the hook--he said, "no,"--adding that he had talked on the phone for awhile and maybe the friend had called then.

At this point, what would you think about this? More specifically, using the scale below, how likely is it that you would conclude:

6	5	4	3	2	1
almost certain	very likely	quite likely	quite unlikely	very unlikely	almost never
___ a that the friend who was supposed to call, failed to call					
___ b that your roommate took the phone off the hook, but is not telling you					
___ c that the roommate was on the phone when your friend called.					

Considering your experience with people and situations, if you had to pick either "a," or "b." or "c" as the most likely explanation of this problem situation, which would you choose? (circle one)

a b c